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ABSTRACT

The yearly increase in the number of learning disabled (LD) students is considered, and it is suggested that the increase is one symptom of school systems' unwillingness to deal with the problems or underachievement. A need exists for special educators to differentiate between LD and underachieving students. Three alternatives to the problem are cited: systematic use of local eligibility criteria, creation and support of more effective schools, and advocacy for all handicapped students. Each alternative is explored, and it is concluded that increasing academic learning time can make a dramatic difference. The parents' influence on individualized education program development is considered. Recommendations are proposed whereby parents can influence the teacher and the curriculum, and guidelines are offered for estimating the appropriateness of proposed instructional time in the resource program. (CL)

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Identification and Programming For Learning Disabled Students: The Parents' Part

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Public schools continue to experience crises. Lack of discipline, drug use and poor academic standards head the list of problems attributed to our schools. We have been challenged by charges that special education, mainstreaming and learning disabilities lower the quality of our schools.

The effective schools movement, LD identification criteria and sophisticated advocacy are themes in my response to these challenges. First, I'll demonstrate that LD students continue to increase in number. Next, I'll suggest that an increase in the number of LD students is one symptom of school systems which are unwilling to constructively confront the problem of underachievement. I'll describe the effective schools movement as one which possesses potential for constructively addressing crises in our schools. Third, I'll address the need for criteria to be used in distinguishing LD from underachieving students. And, lastly, if you're still with me, I'll share some keys to use in getting better instruction for your kids.

Special education is defined as "specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a handicapped child" (Federal Special Education Regulations, 1977, 121a 14). Specially designed instruction includes what is taught, how it is taught and when it is taught. "What is taught" is essentially an instructional content issue and refers to curriculum. "How it is taught" is essentially an instructional method issue and refers to teaching procedures. "When it is taught" refers to the sequence of learning tasks and the rate at which students successfully complete these learning tasks. I'll return to specially designed instruction in the advocacy part of my presentation.

To receive specially designed instruction, a student must be handicapped. In Rhode Island, an increasing majority of handicapped students are labeled learning disabled. The total number of handicapped students increases by the number of learning disabled students identified. Both the

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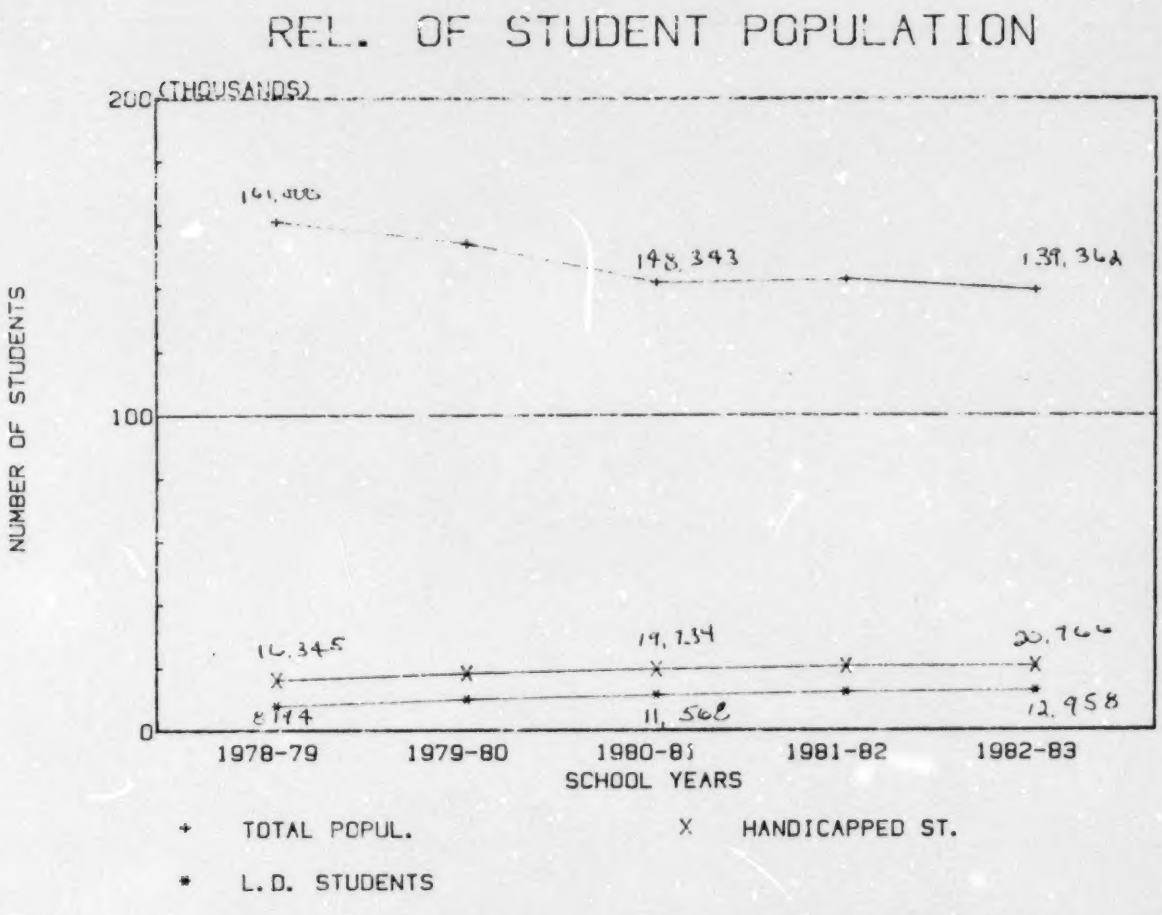
number of handicapped students and the number of learning disabled students increased every year for the last five years while the total number of students enrolled in our schools decreased every year over the past five years. These trends are graphically presented in Figure I.



More than twice as many students as expected were identified as learning disabled over the past four years. The prevalence of learning disabilities is estimated to be approximately three percent (3%) of the school aged population. In the 1979-80 school year 3% of 154,098 students is 4,623 students. More than twice that number, 10,248, students were identified. That remains true for the next three years. My prediction is that the number of learning disabled

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students will continue to increase until schools constructively confront the problem of underachievement. Alternatively the number of LD students will continue to increase until special educators differentiate between LD and underachieving students.

Whatever else is true of them, learning disabled students are initially identified because they do not work up to their ability. Usually LD students perform significantly below their ability in reading and/or math.

With increasing frequency, teachers and sometimes parents notice and become concerned about these underachieving students. Some underachievers are referred to special education for extra help. The only way these underachieving students can get extra help through special education is to be handicapped.

"Learning disabled" seems to describe the educational status of these underachieving students; as a term it's neither too noxious nor too guilt inducing and it may be a reversible condition.

As a consequence of being labeled "learning disabled" the student gets extra help in the resource room. Approximately 80% of the LD students are educated in resource rooms. These students spend about 14% of their school day in the resource room and about 86% of the school day in the classroom. For resource room instruction to have a significant impact on underachievement given these time constraints instructional changes must be initiated in the classroom, the resource teacher must be a super teacher and the student must be both talented and motivated. These conditions do exist for a surprising number of students.

Although students labeled "LD" get extra help, all consequences of this action are not positive. Negative consequences include the following:

1. Learning disabilities becomes synonymous with underachievement.
2. The volume of underachieving students vastly exceeds the capacity of special education resources.
3. Limited special education resources for use with handicapped students are expended on non-handicapped underachieving students.
4. There may be no room in the resource program for legitimate LD students.
5. Limited need to change instructional practices in the school which result in underachievement is experienced.

In summary, one current practice for responding to underachievement in our schools results in disproportionate identification of students as learning disabled, strain on limited special education resources and no change in those school practices which influence the rate of underachievement. Three alternatives which respond to the consequences of this practice exist.

1. Establish local criteria and systematically use ther to identify learning disabled students.
2. Create and support more effective schools.
3. Become a sophisticated advocate for students with learning disabilities -- for all handicapped students.

Both Federal and State Special Education Regulations contain LD identification criteria and procedures. The procedures work fairly well. The criteria do not! Discriminating criteria are needed. Locally developed criteria are likely to be more responsive to local circumstances and idiosyncracies. They are also much more likely to be implemented. Advocates, including parents and professionals, should develop criteria. Locally established criteria for identifying learning disabled students will probably include:

1. The presence of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and academic achievement as indicated by performance on technically adequate tests.

2. Academic deficiencies must be related to deficiencies in processing language.

3. Use of alternative procedures in response to each student's problems in the regular classroom must be demonstrated.

4. Student's motivation does not account for low achievement is limited.

5. Student's responsiveness to conventional remedial approaches.

Parents, through advocacy groups and advisory committees, should participate in developing local criteria for identifying LD students. This alternative for responding to underachievement in our schools appeals to me.

I believe that special education should be reserved for handicapped students and use of these criteria should help. Use of LD identification criteria is an insufficient response to underachievement in our schools. This action eliminates a release valve and intensifies pressures within the system.

The second response to underachievement in our schools involves creation of and support for more effective schools. The effective schools movement is an educational reform effort which is based on descriptions of effective urban schools. Characteristics of effective schools are:

1. strong leadership at the school level;

2. high expectations for student performance conveyed by all staff;

3. an orderly school climate;

4. strong emphasis on teaching basic skills;

5. frequent evaluation and on-going monitoring of pupil progress.

Characteristics of effective schools translate into a number of specific actions including: uniform minimum standards for students, teachers and schools; opportunities for students to learn in a variety of ways; emphasis on homework and study; and strategies to avoid nonpromotion of students. Both the characteristics of effective schools and specific actions must be home grown to be maximally effective.

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The effective schools movement is especially appealing for its potential at addressing the needs of all underachieving students including LD students. Classroom instruction must become more effective if LD students are to more fully profit from it.

We must press for the development and implementation of criteria to differentiate LD from underachieving students. Parents must challenge our educational leadership to promote effective schools -- schools which reduce the prevalence of underachievement while simultaneously promoting educational excellence.

The third response to underachievement is sophisticated advocacy on behalf of our own sons and daughters. Our earlier advocacy efforts addressed equal educational opportunity. Getting public school programs, services and transportation -- indeed getting through the school house door unobstructed consumed our energy and interest. The new chapter in advocacy will focus on educational excellence. It will center on dramatically improving the performance of handicapped students through systematic, aggressive, supportive, interactive instruction.

Students can do one thing more than any other which will influence their academic achievement. It's called academic learning time. Academic learning time is the amount of time a student is actively engaged in learning tasks of a moderate degree of difficulty successfully. Students who engage in high amounts of academic learning time achieve at high levels.

What children learn from their classroom experiences is a function of what they do during class time. The curriculum and the teacher influence what children do during class time. To maximize learning, teachers should assign tasks which are neither too easy nor too difficult, get students to engage in these tasks for long periods of time and insure that the tasks are completed successfully.

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Most LD students experience difficulty in reading. To improve reading skill it is necessary to increase the amount of time students spend reading. Reading means directly responding to print. "Students at the beginning stages of reading need to be taught how to read. Teachers must organize their time so that these instructional activities are increased" (Leinhardt, Zigmond and Cooley, 1981. pp. 357-358). "In classrooms where teachers provide(d) more support and positive, corrective feedback, students gain(ed) more in reading achievement" (Stallings, 1981, p. 13).

To increase students academic achievement, teachers should schedule more time for academic instruction, assign learning tasks of a moderate degree of difficulty and provide personal support, direct instruction and positive, corrective feedback. Such teacher-student interaction increases both time on-task and successful completion of tasks.

Parents can exercise a considerable amount of influence over what is taught and how much time is allocated to it through their child's individualized education program. Collaboratively developed by parents, teachers and administrators, the IEP coordinates a student's unique needs with specially designed instruction and placement. As we all know, the IEP includes statements describing the student's present levels of educational performance, annual goals, short term objectives, the services to be provided, initiation and anticipated duration dates of services and procedures to determine if and when short term objectives are met.

It is often very difficult to figure out what happens at IEP meetings. Sometimes short, sometimes informal and usually controlled by educators, it's difficult to know what your child is getting.

Let the written IEP become the center of your attention. There should be a logical relationship among present level statements, annual goals, short term objectives and amount of service. Most frequently such a logical

relationship is not apparent. So you'll need to impose your own logic and control. The following recommendations are proposed as ways to make sense of the IEP and the IEP meeting. Most significantly, following these recommendations may influence what your child does in school by influencing the teacher and the curriculum.

1. Let each present level statement signify an area requiring specially designed instruction. Often grade equivalent scores on tests administered to your child are reported as present level statements. Ask which subjects are to be addressed in the special education program. Cross off all subjects and test results which will not be addressed in the special education program. Eliminate all superfluous information. Keep only those present level statements in which specially designed instruction will be provided.

2. Request a description of what your child can do for each present level statement. Eliminate all grade equivalent scores and substitute "can do" descriptive statements.

3. Each present level statement should have a related annual goal. This annual goal should estimate your child's performance one year from now. Don't settle for ambiguous claims like "improve reading" or promised actions like "receive extra help in math". Insist upon a response to the question: "What will my child be doing one year from now in this subject?" Expect evasive, elusive responses, but try for descriptive answers. Many factors influence learning and it's very difficult to accurately forecast student performance even one year into the future.

4. Short term objectives should provide detailed information. Ask about the relationship between objectives and your child's report card. Ask when you'll be informed about your child's progress in relation to short term objectives.

5. The amount and frequency of instructional time in the resource program is critical. Your questions should include: "How many minutes per day and how many days per week will my child be in the resource program?" "How will instructional time be allocated to instructional areas identified as present level statements?" "How many other students will be present?" "Will they be working in the same instructional area?" "At the same level?" "How will you distribute your teaching time across areas, students and levels?" "How often will homework be assigned?" "What changes will be made by the classroom teacher in response to my child's unique needs?" "How can I, as a parent, most effectively influence appropriate changes in classroom instruction?"

The following guidelines are proposed for estimating the appropriateness of proposed instructional time in the resource program:

1. Present level statements in different instructional areas will require more time than one or two present level statements.
2. A large amount of progress projected in annual goals will require more instructional time than a modest amount of progress.
3. Many students working in different subjects at various levels will necessitate more time in the resource program for interactive teaching than fewer students, subjects and levels.

Education has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to elevate the human condition. And special education has significantly enriched the lives of many handicapped students and their families.

It is possible today to have both educational excellence and educational equality in our public schools. It's possible to have both instructional excellence and instructional equality for our special needs students. We must vigorously promote both excellence and equality for all students with special needs.

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